

When we hear the word environmental health, people often have different perceptions of what that means. Some have a very vague definition of what that means, while others are very clear and detailed in their definition of environmental health. I feel that we all need to be as clear and detailed as possible and at the same time be able to see the bigger picture as to how some things are related to others and how bad environmental conditions ultimately affect us all.

In my three years of experience in working with the Southwest Workers' Union, which does a variety of community organizing work ranging from running a living wage campaign in the local school districts to dealing with the environmental contamination problems at Kelly Air Force base for almost 10 years, I have learned a great deal of how lax regulations and insufficient oversight of corporations and military bases can lead to grave situations. Many people are already aware of the situation at Kelly Air Force Base both environmentally and of how people's health surrounding the base is as poor as can be; the young as well as the old.

My focus today will be on the most vulnerable of all to the toxins that exist in the everyday environment, and that is the child. When I say everyday I don't mean acceptable levels of chemicals x, y, z either. The reality is that our everyday environment is slowly becoming more and more poisonous. When speaking of children, even before birth bad environmental conditions can cause organ malformation, disruption of function, and even premature death. After birth, pound for pound of body weight, children drink more water, eat more food, and breathe more toxic air. These two points are not my opinion they were taken from "Achievements in Children's Environmental Health" which was published by the ATSDR.

A few recent studies have shown that some Americans have can have an average 167 different chemicals in their body. The research was done with people who did not work with chemicals in their jobs or live in industrial areas. (Mt. Sinai study) The CDC recently did a study as well that measured 116 harmful chemicals, including lead, mercury and other heavy metals, chlorinated solvents, insecticides, and other pesticides, PCB's, and phthalates, to name a few. The researcher also announced some troubling findings, including:

- ☐ Children have twice the levels of certain pesticides in their blood as adults
- ☐ Children have higher levels of cotinine than adults
- ☐ Children have higher levels of certain chemicals used in soft plastic toys
- ☐ Adolescents have higher levels of phthalates
- ☐ Mexican - Americans have three times the levels of DDT in their systems as other Americans

The truth is that modern science cannot calculate what the cumulative affects of different toxins have on people and yet we are seeing more and more pollutants being let out into the air, water, and eventually end up in our soil. Contamination can even exist underground; as we are experiencing at Kelly AFB. Contaminants that have the potential to volatilize and seep through cracks in the ground. When we open our eyes to reality we can see that we are already surrounded by environmental hazards.

Which brings me to a question of "What have we really achieved?" And when I say we, I mean anyone here who claims to be concerned about our environment and the people that live in it (young, old, and every age in between; no matter what color). While we are gaining new knowledge everyday about the effects of chemicals in the environment on human life, at the very same time people who have the ability to change standards for the protection of the environment are letting go or further relaxing the already lax regulations and policies. If anything we need to be making these regulations even more stringent than they are right now. How can we expect to ever achieve a safe environment and good health for all people, if today we say we are concerned and tomorrow we set no limits for corporations and military installations?

Also, while some of us are trying to provide more access to healthcare for children here in the U.S., others are allowing more and more chemical plants and just plain old dirty industries to be built near our schools. Here in Texas it is not uncommon to see this unjust practice taking place, especially in the poor and people of color communities. I ask why there are high rates of cancer and other illnesses in my community and I am told we are predisposed. I ask why are there so many children with learning disabilities in my community and I am told not to worry that it is not uncommon, and that your child just has to put in more effort than the others. These answers do not sound like well thought out answers.

My next question to anyone who can answer it will be "Why are my parents not enjoying there older years and just gracefully getting old, but instead they must both take at least five different medications each before they can start there day and take painkillers every time before bed just so they can sleep through the night? Perhaps someone will come to me and ask, "How was there diet like?" and then again maybe some one who can see the bigger picture can put a little more thought into their answer before they speak. Remember that what we expose ourselves and our children to will definitely affect us in the future. So in closing we must all do our best to protect the health of both young and old, by ensuring the protection of our environment.

*Mrs Angel M. Martinez*